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Bringing the Ivory Tower and Real World Together: Lessons Learned in the Collaborative Process of Preparing Effective Teachers

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Abstract

When the “ivory tower” world of educator preparation faculty collides with the “real world” of in-service teachers, the result can be a partnership that is committed to preparing teachers equipped to meet the needs of diverse learners in 21st century classrooms. The lessons learned in the development of such a partnership include a focus on: a) authentic engagement of all stakeholders; b) honest, diplomatic, and timely communication; c) support and scaffolding for pre-service teachers; d) a variety of authentic assessment measures; and e) assistance for new teachers during the induction period. Strengthening the bonds between university faculty and classroom teachers has contributed to the success of pre-service and beginning teachers and to the enhancement of P-12 student learning.

What happens when the “ivory tower” world of educator preparation faculty collides with the “real world” of in-service teachers? The answer is the development of a partnership that is committed to preparing teachers who demonstrate an understanding of sound educational research and best practices designed to meet the needs of the diverse learners in 21st century classrooms. This dynamic relationship has resulted in authentic conversations between university and P-12 faculty about the quality of the Columbus State University (CSU) teacher preparation program, improving P-12

student learning, and improving the retention of new teachers.

In a recent review of teacher preparation programs across the United States, Arthur Levine (2006) suggests that “the work of education schools should be grounded in the schools” (p. 9). Recognizing that the “ivory tower” image exists of Colleges of Education, we have placed the focus of our teacher preparation program in Early Childhood on a school-based approach which requires a great deal of collaboration between university faculty and P-12 educators. For this approach to be effective,

the participants have to merge from their original university or school system roles into a united group of teacher educators with a clear purpose for preparing effective teachers, improving teacher education, and enhancing P-12 student learning. Since this approach requires constant communication, diplomatic honesty, and a willingness to listen, it is not surprising that it can require time-consuming negotiations as well as substantial professional commitment.

In reflecting on the development of this partnership, the lessons learned have been critical to continued progress. These lessons include a focus on the importance of: a) the authentic engagement of all stakeholders in the establishment and implementation of the partnership; b) honest, diplomatic, and timely communication; c) providing support and scaffolding for pre-service teachers as they take risks, stretch their boundaries, and encounter cognitive dissonance in real world settings; d) using a variety of authentic assessment measures to verify the progress of pre-service teachers and P-12 students and evaluate the partnership; and e) extending the collaboration to include mentoring and the provision of support for new teachers as they assume their first roles as professionals in the field of education.

Lesson 1: Authentically engage all parties involved so that each stakeholder has a voice in the establishment and implementation of the partnership.

The development of our Partner School Network has evolved into a true partnership over time. We have moved from having separate roles in the process of helping pre-service teachers develop to a relationship in which all parties have contributed to each other's continued growth. Along the way, there have been various levels of collaboration. The evaluation of pre-service teachers was

formerly the sole responsibility of the university faculty. P-12 and pre-service teachers have now become involved in providing meaningful feedback essential for growth as educators. There has been collaborative planning of course syllabi and negotiation of assignments in field placements to meet the needs of the university, the pre-service teachers, and the classroom teachers. The university has actively sought feedback from partner school faculty through surveys and discussions. These examples represent only a few of the collaborative efforts that have made it possible for us to have the kind of partnership in which each stakeholder has a voice.

A long-standing belief among classroom teachers has been that university faculty are too removed from the day-to-day activity of the elementary classroom (Levine, 2006). In some cases, university faculty have felt distanced as changes rapidly occur in school districts across the nation in response to new accountability measures. At times, a disconnect exists between what is advocated at the university and what happens in P-12 classrooms. As a result, pre-service teachers have been confused about whether to follow the theories and practices learned in their college coursework or those used by classroom teachers in "real world" settings. This dissonance has been identified as a weakness of teacher education programs (Epanchin & Colucci, 2002). In order to improve collaboration and address issues such as this, the partnership has been expanded to strengthen the relationships among university faculty, P-12 faculty, and pre-service teachers.

During 2006-2007, a university faculty member teamed with one partner school to teach mathematics to one class of third graders every day. The project had multiple goals, which gave each member a

voice in the partnership. The goals included having a daily presence in the school to feel more connected to the demands that were affecting teachers and providing a research-based model of mathematics instruction for both pre-service and classroom teachers. The school administration wanted the faculty to develop and implement effective models of mathematics instruction. They all looked forward to the potentially positive outcomes for their students and teachers. The university welcomed the opportunity to reconnect with the daily life of an elementary school.

As the year progressed, a trusting relationship formed between the university professor and the school administration, faculty, and staff. Classroom teachers began to provide feedback concerning the needs of the pre-service teachers assigned to their classrooms for field experiences. Thus, they began to take ownership of their role in teacher education, a role that includes guiding and supporting the pre-service teachers as they apply what they are learning (Epanchin & Colucci, 2002). Pre-service teachers were able to articulate their needs more clearly, knowing that the school and university faculty were working together. The university faculty were able to better understand current classroom needs and pressures. A more open relationship began to develop as the common goals of the stakeholders became evident.

As a result of this year-long relationship, there is now the opportunity for further extension of the partnership. We have begun to develop a series of professional development activities for teachers at the partner school geared toward meeting their specific pedagogical and content needs. Teachers have met in grade-level groups with a university professor for collaborative planning. Model lessons have been conducted at the school for several classroom teachers. Some teachers are

working toward a lesson-study model of professional development. Pre-service teachers are involved in professional development sessions alongside school faculty. Stakeholders continue to have a voice in the ongoing development of the partnership as they collaboratively engage in the task of improving student learning.

Lesson 2: Talk through issues as they arise. Communication is the key. Be bold and deal with issues diplomatically, honestly, and head-on.

Sensitive issues can be difficult to address. Sharing the truth about negative experiences comes only when a trusting relationship has been established and when all parties involved are certain that they share a common goal. This is especially true when dealing with issues that arise in partnerships between universities and schools where perceptions often cloud reality.

Our experiences with partner schools consist of working with faculty liaisons and administrators to obtain field placements for pre-service teachers, working with classroom teachers as they guide and mentor pre-service teachers, and obtaining feedback from all parties regarding field-placements. The feedback has been used to make improvements in the program and to guide future field placements within the partner schools. Until recently, feedback from pre-service teachers regarding their experiences with classroom teachers had been limited to university use, mainly to determine whether particular teachers should continue to host pre-service teachers. Often, pre-service teachers find themselves completing field experiences in classrooms that are not quality models (Epanchin & Colucci, 2002). When this is the case, it is easy to retreat from that classroom, assigning future students to what we think are more appropriate environments. However, as our

partnerships have strengthened, partner schools have begun to ask for input in shaping the climate of the schools. They have begun to rely upon us as a true partner who is a part of that climate.

Recently, administrators at some partner schools approached us concerning the feedback received from pre-service teachers' reflections about and evaluations of their field placements. The administrators requested access to that feedback based on their need to continue to improve the quality of their faculty and instruction. After all, the university had been able to make improvements in its program based upon feedback from the school faculty. The school, they reasoned, should be afforded that same opportunity.

Knowing the feedback was sometimes harshly critical, we were reluctant to share what could be potentially hurtful to the partner school. University faculty members began to talk candidly with the school administrators about the fact that some of the feedback would be hard to hear. The administrators talked openly about issues within their school that were in need of attention and their plans for addressing those issues. Through the dialogue, it became obvious that the ultimate goal in obtaining the feedback was to benefit the children, not to gather evidence against teachers.

It was agreed that the feedback would be released in a manner that would ensure the anonymity of the pre-service and classroom teachers. As expected, school administrators were somewhat surprised by the nature of the feedback. Rather than avoid the situation, the university faculty used the information to begin a dialogue with administrators to assist in developing an accurate picture of what occurred in some classrooms because, often, pre-service teachers' perceptions of classroom situations may be skewed (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

The administration then embarked on a school-wide plan of action to address the identified concerns.

Through continued dialogue between the university and the schools, negotiations regarding the placement of pre-service teachers with specific classroom teachers have become the standard. By boldly dealing with issues such as these directly and honestly, the mutual goals of the stakeholders in the partnership are met. This honest communication has contributed to a heightened sense of respect between all partners.

Lesson 3: Be prepared to provide support and scaffolding for pre-service teachers as they take risks, stretch their boundaries, and encounter cognitive dissonance in real world settings.

All teachers remember the feeling of walking into a classroom for the first time as a pre-service teacher ...nervous anticipation and excitement, eager looks into students' faces for some hint of approval and respect, fear that everything would fall apart at any moment. Questions such as, "Can I do this?", "Will the students enjoy my teaching?", "Will the students learn anything?", and "Oh no, what was the first thing on the lesson plan?" spin through their minds. Then, with a smiling, supportive nod from the "real classroom teacher" to provide focus, courage, and a reminder to breathe, the pre-service teacher begins the journey toward becoming a professional educator.

It is the support of the classroom teacher, along with the university faculty, that enables pre-service teachers to take each step in their development. Some classroom teachers eagerly take on the role of mentor to pre-service teachers; others struggle with the role. Some understand that pre-service teachers are still in the process of taking classes, gaining experience, and constructing their understanding of teaching; others

expect the pre-service teachers to “perform” expertly each time they step in the classroom. We have learned that it is vital for classroom teachers and university faculty to work together to provide support for the pre-service teachers. They must feel safe to take risks, to try new ideas, to ask questions, and even to fail. It is through these experiences that the greatest learning occurs.

Each classroom teacher serves as a model and mentor for the pre-service teacher. This role includes providing systematic feedback and evaluation of the pre-service teacher’s work. The most successful teachers in our partnership meet regularly with their pre-service teachers (individual, grade-level, and/or across grade-levels) to reflect on experiences and plan for future teaching. They also commit to consistent communication with the pre-service teachers to coordinate schedules, reflect on experiences, and plan for future teaching.

The classroom teachers and the university faculty complete formal observation cycles of the pre-service teachers, which include meeting for reflection, identifying strengths, targeting areas for improvement, and developing plans for improvement. It is important for all participants to remember that the goal for these experiences is to improve teaching and learning. Some classroom teachers struggle with providing constructive feedback to their pre-service teachers. They are sometimes stuck in a mode of being a “friend” rather than a supporting mentor and are reluctant to give accurate ratings. University faculty help classroom teachers realize that the lack of accurate, honest ratings and feedback is actually detrimental to the development of the pre-service teacher. It is helpful for classroom teachers and university faculty to collaborate and agree on an evaluation rubric. Working to establish a deep understanding of what areas

are being evaluated and developing inter-rater reliability is critical in promoting quality, meaningful feedback.

The university faculty also participate with the classroom teachers and the pre-service teachers as co-collaborators. We have found it beneficial for university faculty to have a consistent, visible presence in the schools through activities such as collaborative planning, modeling teaching strategies, team teaching, and facilitating joint planning and teaching. Some facilitate monthly meetings with classroom teachers to review the progress of pre-service teachers, support modeling and mentoring efforts, and to problem-solve procedural issues. They also work with classroom teachers to identify areas for additional professional learning based on the needs of all participants.

Finally, continued development for all partners occurs as classroom teachers, university faculty, and pre-service teachers collaborate. Dialogue between all partners contributed to this development. It is through these collaborative efforts that we learned to provide support and scaffolding for pre-service teachers as they take risks, stretch their boundaries, and encounter cognitive dissonance in real world settings.

Lesson 4: Use a variety of authentic assessment measures to verify the progress of pre-service teachers and P-12 students and to determine the success of the partnership.

Throughout the development of the partnership between the university and local schools, consideration was given to evaluation of the partnership. Over time, we have worked to include authentic assessment techniques that address such a multi-faceted program. Assessment tools were developed to evaluate the performance of pre-service teachers and determine the impact on P-12 student learning, classroom teachers, and

administrators. Additionally, informal methods of assessment occur on a daily basis as all partners note successes, challenges, questions, and concerns. This ongoing review is invaluable for addressing issues as they occur.

Prior to the development of the partnership with the local schools, faculty at the university developed instruments designed to evaluate the practice and dispositions of pre-service teachers within the program. The Model of Appropriate Practice (MAP) is based on the work of Charlotte Danielson (1996) and is used as an assessment instrument for observations in all field-based experiences, including student teaching. The MAP measures pre-service teachers' performance in four domains: planning and preparation; the classroom environment; instruction; and professional responsibilities. University faculty also developed an instrument to assess pre-service teachers' dispositions, such as the ability to interact appropriately with others; use the proper protocol to solve problems; and accept and use constructive criticism.

Because a great deal of thought had been invested in the development of each instrument, university faculty chose to provide training for classroom teachers to increase the reliability of the instruments rather than undertake a collaborative redesign. These instruments are currently used by educator preparation faculty at the school and the university as pre-service teachers progress through the program. Consistent use of these instruments in designated courses provides multiple assessment points for pre-service teachers' performance and dispositions.

Because the highly publicized need for schools to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirements has raised the level of accountability for classroom teachers, they expressed hesitancy to relinquish their classrooms to novices. To

accommodate this concern and to demonstrate that pre-service teachers have a positive impact on P-12 students, educator preparation faculty at the school and university review P-12 student work samples to monitor student progress. Pre-service teachers complete a project during student teaching requiring them to document student learning during a selected unit of study. Pre-service teachers review student learning at the individual and class levels and plan additional learning experiences for students not making sufficient progress.

In 2001, Program Advisory Councils (PAC) were developed to provide input from practitioners into program development and revision at CSU. These Councils were comprised of university and P-12 faculty in local schools. The PACs provide an opportunity for additional discourse among educator preparation faculty about best practices in educating the next generation of teachers.

Formal and informal measures are used to evaluate the partnership. These include surveys, discussion groups, informal conversations, rating scales, and electronic communication from all partners. Using a variety of authentic assessment measures allows us to verify the progress of pre-service teachers and P-12 students and to determine the success of the partnership.

Lesson 5: Continue to collaborate with partners to mentor and provide support for new teachers as they assume their first roles as professionals in the field of education.

Retaining quality teachers in our nation's schools continues to be a vital concern among educators as teacher shortages and attrition reach alarmingly high rates. The National Education Association reports that 20% of all newly-hired teachers nationwide leave their teaching positions within the first three years. Additionally,

many urban school districts experience a 50% attrition rate among teachers during their first five years of teaching (National Education Association, n.d.). Induction programs for new teachers can reduce attrition rates by half, ensuring that quality instruction is provided to meet the needs of a diverse student population (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2006; National Education Association, n.d.).

In Fall 2003, the College of Education collaborated with area schools in an attempt to better retain teachers. Through a grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, a five-year mentoring program entitled STEADY (Sustained Teacher Education Advisement for the Defining Years) was implemented to provide support and encouragement to our first and second year teachers. Beginning teachers were assigned two mentors, one from the College of Education and another from their content area. First year teachers received two classroom visits from their College of Education mentors, and all received monthly e-mails. These contacts served as a complement to existing induction programs already.

The STEADY Program not only provided assistance in the form of content resources and pedagogical approaches but support in a more personal, caring way. "It was comforting to know that someone had my back once I became a part of the STEADY Program. I really appreciated having someone available to me, if I needed them. Thanks for not letting me feel all alone this year", stated a first year teacher on an anonymous survey conducted by the mentoring program.

The creation of this "safety net" for first and second year teachers was effective in improving the retention of teachers. Ninety percent of the participants in the STEADY Program from 2003 were still

teaching as of May 2007, surpassing the program's original goal of a 75% retention rate. However, challenges remained for the mentoring program. "One of the main challenges was to find the first year teachers. Once located, the next challenge was getting the first and second year teachers to respond and request help," explained STEADY Program Mentor Support Specialist, M. Regnier (personal communication, August 30, 2007).

To minimize these problems, school personnel directors worked with the College of Education to identify teachers for the program. Some school districts allowed representatives from the STEADY Program to introduce the program at teacher orientation sessions. Although the program faced challenges, we learned that through collaboration between the College of Education and local school districts, we could successfully administer a mentoring program that would help retain teachers and therefore enhance success among children.

Conclusion

Creating and maintaining a strong connection between university faculty and classroom teachers is essential to ensure the success of pre-service teachers throughout teacher preparation programs and through the induction period. When teacher education majors graduate, their tie to the university is often severed. Because many university faculty have not been in the "trenches" or out of their "ivory tower" in a number of years, classroom teachers may view these faculty as being disconnected from the real world of teaching. This can produce obstacles that hinder the development of partnerships between university faculty and classroom teachers.

To build and foster relationships with its partner schools, the College of Education at Columbus State University focused on several key aspects of the early

childhood teacher preparation program. These included: a) engaging all stakeholders in the development of the partnership; b) forming a network of open communication between university faculty and classroom teachers; c) providing a system of shared support for pre-service teachers; d) completing collaborative assessments of pre-service teachers and P-12 students; and e) sustaining support for first- and second-year teachers through mentoring programs. Strengthening the bonds between university faculty and classroom teachers has taught us how important this partnership is to the success of our pre-service and beginning teachers and to the enhancement of student learning. We are committed to continuing these collaborative efforts as we face future challenges in the teaching profession together.

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